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Eli Tomac is firmly in focus with five of seventeen rounds left in 2017 AMA Supercross and after closing a deficit of 29 points to just 7 behind an anxious Ryan Dungey; each passing fixture becomes more unmissable

Photo by Cudby/Shepherd

BRIGHT LIGHT



GAJSER FLYING AGAIN

The Grand Prix of Argentina saw the world champion back on top and with his CRF450SW a wider shade of red as the new front-runner in MXGP. Mexico now this weekend and the last flyaway until September

Photo by Ray Archer





THREEWAY

Somehow there was room (and grip) around the fast kinks and curves of the Losail circuit for multiple lines at the first outing in MotoGP 2017. Turn the page for our comprehensive perspective from Qatar

Photo by CormacGP







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MOTOGP

GRAND PRIX OF QATAR

LOSAIL · MARCH 25-26th

MotoGP winner: Maverick Viñales, Yamaha

Moto2 winner: Franco Morbidelli, Kalex

Moto3 winner: Joan Mir, Honda



MOTOGP QATAR

MAVERICK'S TIME TO REIGN

By Adam Wheeler
Blogs by David Emmett
& Neil Morrison
Photos CormacGP



It was tight. And there were only a few seconds and precious moments in it. All the waiting, talking, speculation and debates came to a head in a delayed and stubborn schedule at Losail in Qatar on Sunday evening...

The rain came down again.

Images of Movistar Yamaha boss Lin Jarvis staring at the sky as his victorious rider celebrated in Parc Ferme and his teammate breathed long and hard after unearthing the sort of recovery that is only solidifying his prolonged genius at the highest level of motorcycle racing, were particularly apt as a sustained and heavy shower coated the MotoGP podium and would surely have rendered more chaos on a fractured and obstinate opening fixture of the season. People ran for shelter in the paddock...and not for the first time.

MotoGP made it. But only just. The complications of a flooded track on Saturday, the question marks over visibility, grip and tyre erosion and a slight feeling of apathy to the inclement conditions swirling around Losail meant a delay to the 'main event' after a brief watering on the grid and sighting laps. If the deluge that arrived to greet Maverick Viñales' third career GP victory (and the first in Yamaha colours after indicating this would be the status quo in the wake of an absolute pre-season testing period) appeared any earlier then it is feasible that the Grand Prix of Qatar would have slipped to Monday.

Doha is in an ever-present state of flux and change and the nearby city's inadequacy to cope with the kind of rain and electrical storms witness across the days of the first fixture of eighteen in MotoGP was a clear sign that this extreme weather was highly unusual for the 120k-long desert nation. Roads were flooded and hotels formed new 'swimming pools' next to their customary

offerings. The freaky state of affairs has to be remembered in the post-mortem of a Grand Prix when questions over scheduling and grip – even drainage – are analysed again. Losail would do well to at least consider a renewal of the asphalt that has been in place for over seventeen years as a first step.

Saturday's subsidence and the kerfuffle that delayed the MotoGP race by over thirty minutes added to a drawn-out affair at Losail. As one journalist commented the weekend was very much a case of 'hurry up and wait'. The interruptions coupled with the extra Thursday practice session meant the race could not have come quicker.

Within the damp paddock there was plenty of toil: Jorge Lorenzo's Ducati debut stuttering in the face of Andrea Dovizioso's competitiveness, Valentino Rossi seriousness; uncompetitive and worried about feeling with the hard Michelin front tyre, KTM duo Pol Espargaro and Bradley Smith facing the reality of the beginnings of a development programme, Honda's riders again wrestling the idiosyncrasies of the RCV, Andrea Iannone's truculence with the media partially offset with some surprising form on the Suzuki...but ending in the gravel once again after hitting Marquez ('I felt a bump at the moment I opened the gas and thought 'oh, something with the electronics'...with Iannone it is always, always close,' the Catalan said) and even Viñales dealing with the new position and pressure as favourite.

Aside from the respective recoveries from the Yamaha duo – Rossi claiming to have found a step with set-up and was one of the few relieved for a later race and dipping temperatures and Viñales rampant after being cautious at the start – there were exceptional moments. Aleix Espargaro's verification of the potential behind the Aprilia ('it is an easy bike to ride') lead to a highest classification yet for the Italians and





if the race had been the original twenty-two instead of twenty laps then he might even have pipped Dani Pedrosa and the lagging Marc Marquez. Scott Redding's Friday FP2 pace and effective Sunday outing on the GP16 was noteworthy and then Johann Zarco led the field for five lap using the soft Michelin and showed signs of being able to escape but veering slightly off line in Turn 2 wrecked any chance of a memorable debut. Valentino Rossi's anecdote in the post-race press conference was interesting to hear: that VR46 Academy member Franco Morbidelli had talked and warned his mentor back in Tavullia that Zarco's pace and ability to stretch a race in the last ten laps was a skill that the MotoGP elite had to be wary of. Expect much more from the quietly-spoken Frenchman. Iannone's eager right hand made his case – and then dismissed it – for Suzuki, but it was encouraging to see the competitiveness of the blue bikes from the off.

Elsewhere and Morbidelli's first in Moto2 was enjoyed at a canter and Joan Mir survived what was a thirteen rider skirmish for the most part in Moto3.

Late Sunday evening and the teams wrapped and crated the pitbox set-ups and bikes while seeming to release and expel the tension. The travails of Qatar had been traversed and the long trek to Argentina was already in the mind with stickers slapped on boxes and podium trophies stuffed into hand luggage.





The subjects surrounding **Dani Pedrosa** in Qatar tended to focus on the backroom support he has put in place for 2017 and the presence of Sete Gibernau as a form of trackside assistance. Pedrosa was able to keep a dogged Aleix Espargaro at bay in the race but whether his fifth position will be the start of a championship tilt could depend on the 31 year old's chemistry in the garage.

How is Sete lending a hand?

He helps in many areas and has so much experience. I have experience as well but we share it and talk about our mistakes and feelings and combine this to profit our work in many different areas. He was in the box [during practice]; every time I came in he was there and I think it is more important to be there because there are more things happening. Some days it might be more helpful to be out on the track, like he was at the test.

Having those figures around you must be reassuring and perhaps it is not something you've really had in the last few seasons...

You can focus on one thing and not worry about many at the same time. It allows you to progress and keep focussed on the riding. You will have other matters like the press, safety commission or events but when you are here it is just about the riding. To have a team around like Rhys, Edu and Sete helps me to look more at the bike.

CASHING IN

Fittingly at one of MotoGP's most lucrative appointments, Dorna were able to announce a deeper association with one of their Grand Prix title sponsors - Austrian financial firm Lyoness - and together both offer a cashback and loyalty scheme around MotoGP that will return 5% cashback on purchases made under the Lyoness 'umbrella', shopping points and discounts. It means an added incentive for followers of the series to purchase tickets and selected official products while being able to profit in other ways (seems handy to offset those ticket booking charges) Lyoness was set up in 2003 and the dignitaries from the firm like Hubert Freidl (CEO) and Wim Grobler (General Director) explained they now have seven million member and seventy-thousand merchants onboard. 'There are advancements in shopping and technology every year and we are keeping abreast of developments,' said Grobler.



'We are honoured and can feel the Austrian 'power' [in MotoGP],' commented Dorna Commercial Area MD Pau Serracanta. 'We have been working for more than one year to prepare this programme and we're very excited. It is kinda like an innovation, and this is one of the values of our sport.'

Serracanta also alluded to the type of customer that will be intrigued by the Lyoness operation but also hooked from the world of MotoGP. 'We have more than twelve million followers on Facebook and many of them 'millennials',' he added. 'They follow our sport and they will love this Cashback programme.'



NO DRAIN, NO GAIN

The MotoGP pitlane and paddock was talkative and communal on Saturday night with the delay over track work to get the final practice and qualification sessions underway. The riders obviously knew more than most as many MotoGP stars quickly changed out of their leathers and started hanging around and giving TV crews desperate to fill in their live broadcast slots ruminations on the evening, Losail, the climate and expectations of what the next twenty-four hours could bring. By now the reasons for the halt to Saturday have been milled endlessly: poor drainage led to flooded run-off and gravel trap areas and Dorna Race Direction representative Loris Capirossi (who had run a night 'wet simulation' at the test and cleared the circuit in terms



riders eying a hard front Michelin possibly having to think again.

Out in the pitlane – and even in the presence of several hundred people milling around – the asphalt was noticeably slick and a shimmering stretch of water sat plum in the middle of the grid. Down at Turn 1 it seemed like a small army were trying to address the flooding problem and Capirossi confirmed that the first, fourth and tenth corners were the hotspots. Or wetspots.

Once the evening programme had been cancelled with hopes pinned on Sunday, a laborious process of sourcing riders' opinions began and soon became weary. Marc Marquez rightly pointed out that he had more than 300 laps of Losail under his belt thanks to the test and the extra session from Thursday but like all of his peers was unwise to the possibilities or feelings around a wet, partially damp or grip affected circuit. Asking for further speculation seemed like a waste of time as the weather and forecasting was proving to be frustratingly inconsistent. Saturday night was one of the strangest days in MotoGP for a while and the protracted nature of the evening and the hunt for recrimination (as well as the petty criticisms levelled at Qatar) meant it wasn't one of the finest.

of visibility at least, putting the decision to compete in the hands of the riders) claimed that pumping the water away only led to more liquid rising to the surface. Areas of the service road were barely passable and streams of rainwater crossed several parts of the track, making the (many) dry sections another headache in terms of tyre choice. Capirossi might have claimed that drainage and excessive water is not a problem unique to only Losail but the asphalt has been in place since 2004 and Jorge Lorenzo hinted that resurfacing is overdue in the riders Safety Commission meeting. The 'dirty' rain and presence of sand/dust was also another consideration for how the asphalt will react with the tyres. The situation placed extra urgency and emphasis on the extended warm-up session to see how teams would make final decisions for race set-up and those



MOTOGP QATAR



Plenty of head-shaking for the thirty-eight year old on Thursday and Friday and although the trademark smile and easy laugh was back in place during the post-race press conference for his third position, Qatar had been a turbulent experience for **#46**. 'I always suffer a bit with the new front tyres because they have a casing that is a bit softer and in all my career I always like the front [to be] very hard to have a good stability, for this reason I suffer,' he said on Friday. 'We need to improve them and use in a different way.' Rossi was not too specific on the grounds and reasons for his turnaround in speed and form but was thankful for the cooler conditions and the extra delay. Viñales stated that Rossi could never be ruled out of the hunt come the dimming of red lights on Sundays and the Italian also semi-joked that his remarkable competitiveness – now into a twenty-second Grand Prix year with 222 podiums – comes through age and through lacking a little motivation to push limits outside of a racing environment, i.e. practice and qualification. Through his third position he became the oldest rider since Jack Findlay in 1977 to hoist a podium trophy in the premier class.



Only three other riders in the premier class have won with both a Suzuki and a Yamaha. Can you name them? (answers on the next page) **Maverick Viñales** set more milestones with his success in Qatar. 'When I do my best on this bike I go really fast,' he understated after taking a first Pole Position on the M1 courtesy of his Friday effort. 'Race pace? I did many laps in the '55s with a race tyre so that's great. I feel comfortable on the bike. When you feel like this, and you have confidence in the front you can push. I always want to push.' The former Moto3 World Champion spoke before the race about a conservative approach – in spite of his formidable pace – and it was this careful attitude that initially saw him hover on the top five for the formative stages of the Grand Prix sprint: 'You know, I'm that type of rider that, when the track is not good, I don't risk. I want to bring back the bike to the box.' Ironically it was Rossi's presence that gave him an extra nudge and then again when hunting Dovizioso after the Italian tried to break free of the oncoming blue #25. Watching Viñales take slightly different lines behind the Ducati and pop-up the Yamaha on corner exits to drive the power onto the Losail black was to appreciate a new master of the discipline. It would be a very tough task to find someone in doubt of Maverick's potential but now his ability to forge a campaign where he can be a contender is understandably the next area for scrutiny.






It's fair to say there were more dips than peaks for **Scott Redding** in 2016 but the situation now at Octo Pramac Ducati with Danilo Petrucci charged with a latest-spec Desmosedici while the Brit steers a GP16 has thrown him into an invigorating underdog role. Redding seemed to respond to the status in Qatar and was frank about his predicament and the repercussions.

'It's not really a battle now with me and Danilo for the bike,' he said referring to the internal dispute in 2016 as to who would benefit from updated support for '17. 'A deal was a deal. I accepted it. I'm not going to worry too much about it. It's definitely a bit easier knowing that he has a different bike, and that it's a better bike. If he beats me, that's how it should be. If I beat him, he's in big trouble. He's got to be with the factory guys. That's something that is going to help me. A bit less pressure. A bit less stress

when things aren't going right. If things don't go right for me, I'll be on the sidelines. If they don't go right for him, people will know he has a GP17. He knows he has a GP17. If he doesn't perform with it... He's the one that's going to feel the pressure more than anyone else. When I look at it now and the problems he's been having I'm actually quite glad that I don't have the bike at this moment in time.'

Team politics aside, Redding rode a decent race to seventh on Sunday night (while Petrucci was doomed to retire with a technical problem). Regardless of the motivation he is sucking out of the Pramac predicament there is also the fact that the 24 year old is simply more competitive on the GP16 and shouldn't have to worry about some of the wayward experiences he suffered with the Michelins last season. Many more points seem to lie on the horizon.





As hinted by his Honda peers, the world champion's startling ability to morph around the hard aspects of riding the RCV means he is relentlessly competitive. On this occasion a front tyre switch (that both he and Cal Crutchlow oddly claim was a decision out of their hands) cost #93 the ability to fulfil a modest objective of fighting for the podium ('we have to be realistic'). Marquez seems to continue to struggle with punch out of the turns; to the point where he has considered altering his style in the interim and until Honda refine the electronics package once more. 'We are losing on acceleration, but I still believe with the electronics we are not in the correct place and at this circuit we have more problems than usual,' he said. 'Corner entry: I try to not be fast like last year,' he explained. 'I try to sacrifice the brake point a bit to use more the corner speed. But it's quite difficult because one of the problems is still corner exit; we are losing too much and missing something there with the connection of the gas.'

Interestingly **Marc** was one of the riders that sat poised on the motorcycle during the grid assembly while a larger group discussed with race officials plans for the race after the perilous sighting lap. 'When I saw that there were 12 riders there, I said, 'OK, there's already 12 riders there and everybody will say the same because it was wet'. So I stayed on the bike, focused, concentrated, and in the end, they took the decision to delay the race. I think that was the correct option.' Unfortunately, Marquez's reticence to leave the Honda and his position could very well have led to extra deliberation and then eventually the change to the softer front tyre that eroded his race threat. 'We delayed the race...the temperature was dropping the humidity was getting higher. Then they said two laps to check the track. I was with the hard front tyre, and after all these things I had some doubts. The Michelin guy said you are the only one with the hard, be careful, you can crash. And so I said, OK I go to the medium. It was a mistake.'

HEADACHES FOR HONDA...?

Is fourth a bad result? Or to put it another way, is fourth such a bad result at the first race that Marc Márquez has already given himself a huge mountain to climb? With the factory Repsol Hondas of Márquez and Dani Pedrosa finishing in fourth and fifth, seven seconds behind the winner, is the RC213V in trouble?

It would be an easy conclusion to draw. After all, last year, Márquez finished on the podium in Qatar, just a couple of seconds off the winner, and right behind Andrea Dovizioso on the Ducati. The last time he finished off the podium was 2015, and we know what happened then. Márquez struggled with the bike in the first half of the year, and crashed trying to keep himself in the championship fight. He fell off in three of the first seven races, and entered the second half of the season already 74 points adrift of then leader Valentino Rossi. It was a deficit he would not make up again.

There are worrying signs for the Hondas this year as well. Acceleration remains the RC213V's

Achilles heel, as was obvious from the helicopter footage of Márquez coming onto the straight alongside the factory Yamahas and Ducati of Andrea Dovizioso. More painfully still, when the cameras showed Dani Pedrosa battling with Aleix Espargaro on the Aprilia RS-GP, it was the much taller, much heavier rider on the bike (who finished no higher than seventh last year) which was leaving the lightweight rider on the championship-winning bike for dead. In terms of top speed, Márquez was 6 km/h down on Dovizioso, and 1.5 km/h down on Valentino Rossi. He was even slower than Aleix Espargaro, though there was very little in it.

There are a lot of reasons why Márquez had a tough night on Sunday. Some of those are unique to this race at Qatar, others are more to do with the development of the RC213V. Márquez' result on Sunday was not a real reflection of his potential there. Nor should it be extrapolated too far into the rest of the season. The biggest problem was one not of his own making. The weather had one last, cruel joke to play on Sunday evening.

The medium front was the wrong tyre for the Hondas. Márquez and Crutchlow both overheated the front pushing on the brakes to try to stick with it. Crutchlow got a fraction off line and crashed. Márquez, perhaps more conscious of his long term objectives, stuck with the group at the front for the first half of the race, but had to let them go. He lost nearly six seconds in the last ten laps.

Would Márquez have finished higher if he had stuck to his guns over the hard front tyre?

By David Emmett



“After the race, I thought with a hard I was able to fight for the victory until the end. But maybe I was also able to crash!” was his diplomatic response. The real issue, he underscored once again, was the lack of acceleration, which made the bike so hard to ride. “If you have an easy bike, then it’s easier to make the correct decision. If you have a bike where you are on the limit, if you don’t make the perfect decision, you already lose too much time.”

This is the Honda’s biggest problem: the bike is aggressive in acceleration, wheelying and spinning the rear coming out of corners. The riders have to fight the bike to get it under control on corner exit, and that is losing them time. The Yamahas and Ducatis are better at creating mechanical grip, and are just driving out of the corner. Much of their top speed advantage comes from there, from drive onto the straight, rather than outright horsepower.

Honda’s switch to a big-bang firing interval is meant to address this. By changing the crankshaft to group the point at which each cylinder is fired so that it is closer together, Honda have attempted to make an engine which is more docile and user-friendly. That, at least, is the theory. With spec electronics, it is a little more difficult. Changing the engine character also means creating a whole new set of engine maps to optimise the new engine’s behaviour. It’s not quite starting from scratch, but it’s not far off. There is still a lot of work to be done before they get it just right.

The good news for Márquez is that the process will be much quicker this year than it was in 2016. Honda learned a lot about the Magneti Marelli system in 2016, but it took them until the summer break, between the Sachsenring and Austria, to bring a software update which got the best out of the existing engine. With a better understanding of the idiosyncrasies of the system, they should have a much better electronics model some time around

Jerez or Le Mans. With better torque maps and traction control settings, Márquez should be able to take advantage of the benefits the big-bang engine offers. If his history is any guide, at that point he becomes a very hard man to beat.

Of course, the big difference with 2016 is that Marc Márquez was leading the championship early, and even when he lost the lead, he never trailed Jorge Lorenzo by more than 10 points. Leaving Qatar, Márquez trails Maverick Viñales by 12 points. Making things worse, we head to Argentina, which looks pretty much tailor-made for Viñales on the Yamaha. The Termas de Rio Hondo circuit is fast and flowing, like Phillip Island, where Viñales was three tenths of a second quicker than the reigning world champion. If Viñales wins there, Márquez could find himself 20 points or more behind after just two rounds. Dealing with that kind of pressure will be the true test of Márquez’ character. He will need HRC to fix the RC213V’s acceleration problems sooner, rather than later.



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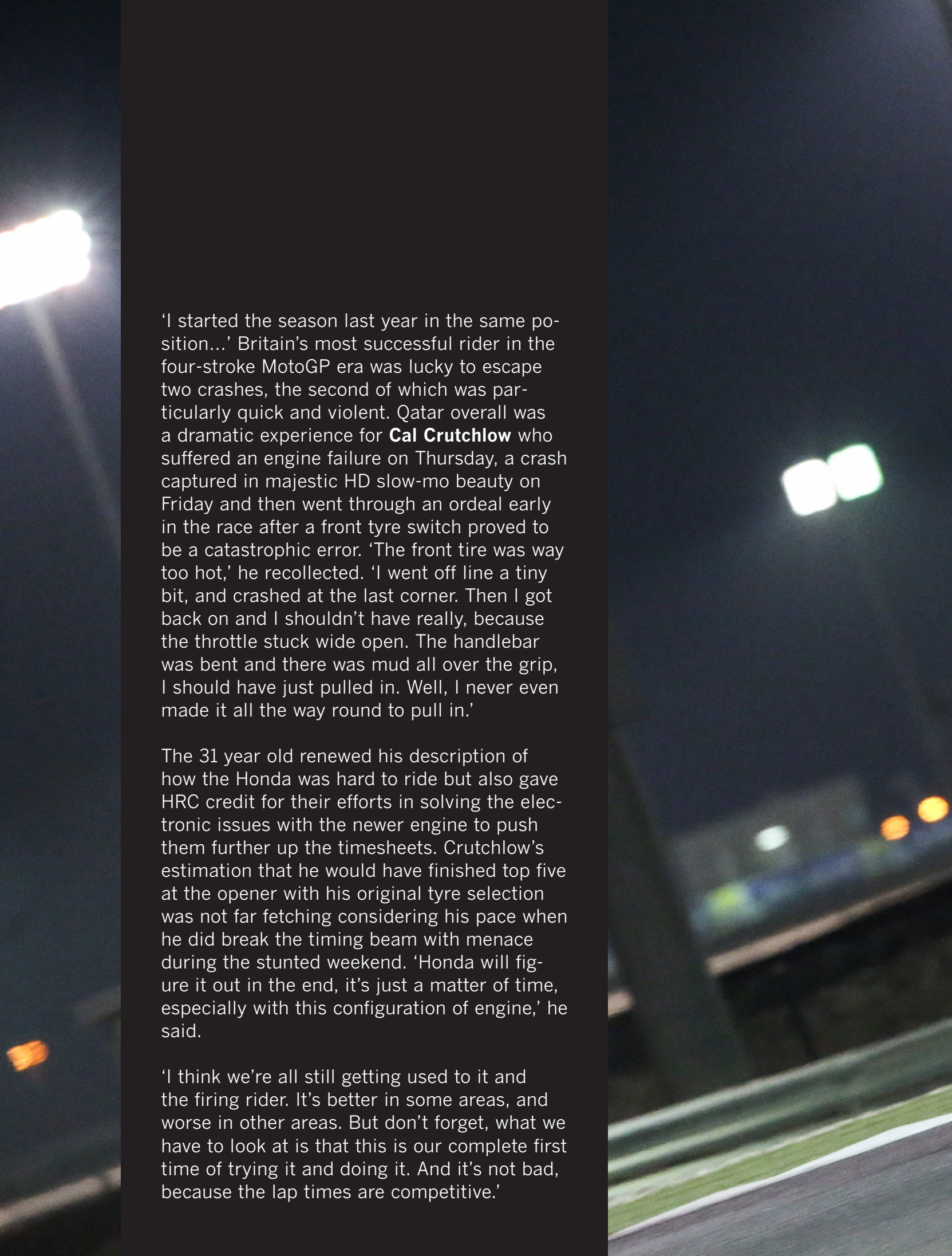
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'Disappointing' was the word **Jorge Lorenzo** used to summarise a Ducati maiden appearance where he also claimed that the Desmosedici was still not 'his' motorcycle and he had to deal with an off-track deviation on the first lap that pushed him almost to the back of the field. All weekend Lorenzo was quizzed on how it felt to grind his new steed to an extended limit and he explained issues of transfer and rear brake emphasis. 'The bike is still quite physical, especially when we don't have rear grip,' he said. 'We need to work on making the bike easier for the rider in all conditions. We still need to try some new settings and something to take profit of the strong point; which is the braking. Obviously we can take profit on the straight – we are the fastest ones and we recover a bit in the final sector. But the speed in the corners, especially when braking, we are not arriving at the limit of the bike.'

'This was not the dream debut...and it was not the ideal conditions to make a debut,' he lamented in the rain in the earliest minutes of Monday morning. 'We have to learn a lot of things. The good thing is we stayed for five or six laps with good lap times. The start was good, we finished the race, we took five points, some others that were faster, they crashed and didn't finish the race.'

Jorge cut a serious figure and his media debrief was actually delayed by a technical meeting with the Ducati team staff but the rider – who turns 30 this season – was able to remain stoic: 'I think today we were worse than we are really.' He credited Andrea Dovizioso as being a 'very clever guy...he didn't make mistakes in the difficult conditions' while his teammate earlier on said that Lorenzo has 'two years to work it out' and forebode that #99's competitiveness will soon gather force.



'I started the season last year in the same position...' Britain's most successful rider in the four-stroke MotoGP era was lucky to escape two crashes, the second of which was particularly quick and violent. Qatar overall was a dramatic experience for **Cal Crutchlow** who suffered an engine failure on Thursday, a crash captured in majestic HD slow-mo beauty on Friday and then went through an ordeal early in the race after a front tyre switch proved to be a catastrophic error. 'The front tire was way too hot,' he recollected. 'I went off line a tiny bit, and crashed at the last corner. Then I got back on and I shouldn't have really, because the throttle stuck wide open. The handlebar was bent and there was mud all over the grip, I should have just pulled in. Well, I never even made it all the way round to pull in.'

The 31 year old renewed his description of how the Honda was hard to ride but also gave HRC credit for their efforts in solving the electronic issues with the newer engine to push them further up the timesheets. Crutchlow's estimation that he would have finished top five at the opener with his original tyre selection was not far fetching considering his pace when he did break the timing beam with menace during the stunted weekend. 'Honda will figure it out in the end, it's just a matter of time, especially with this configuration of engine,' he said.

'I think we're all still getting used to it and the firing rider. It's better in some areas, and worse in other areas. But don't forget, what we have to look at is that this is our complete first time of trying it and doing it. And it's not bad, because the lap times are competitive.'

MOTOGP QATAR



Red Bull KTM were the new boys in the paddock after a year of testing and a pre-view wild-card appearance at Valencia. The forty-strong crew and fetching RC17 brought up the rear of the pack but the atmosphere and diligence in the pitboxes of Bradley Smith and Pol Espargaro were almost as if Losail was 'another day at work in the top ten'. KTM could allegedly have a new engine in contention by the early summer test with an amazing turnaround of just three months (according to some technical insiders). Don't underestimate the Austrians' ability to move quickly; in more ways than one eventually. Both the Brit and the Catalan were able to talk about their new experiences as full factory riders and dissected various topics on the bike and changes to their vocation...

Bradley Smith on...

Altering his style to the screamer RC: It is a little bit harder to come back [to being aggressive] but it is my natural instinct to

ride like that. So it is not as difficult, even after four years when you are trying to change your style it is still a forced effort and didn't come to me naturally. I'm not as aggressive as Pol but the lap-times seem to be the same or not much faster. The biggest thing for me is the rear brake: you need to use it a lot on this bike compared to the Yamaha. Through the rights and lefts and all the way through the corners to help the bike turn and that's the biggest difference.

On meeting his goals with his knee injury:

Yeah I'm super-happy with that. From the Red Bull guys to my physio and my conditioning I'm really happy considering where I was six months ago.



I'm happy to be back like a normal athlete again, moving well and doing the right things on the bike and being able to string long laps together which was something I wasn't able to do for a long time.

On the aggression of the bike: It is an engine thing, the character. There is a reason why everyone is going to a 'big bang theory' type of engine and a reason why people are going heavier on crankshafts, flywheels and stuff like that and it is certainly not to slow down the motorcycle. MotoGP at the moment seems to be about who can use the most power and go forward, rather than use power

and spin. That's something we are continuing to play with in our team. I think a bike needs to be less aggressive in terms of acceleration and electronics and those types of things... but where that comes from I'm not 100% sure.

On where the next gain of time will originate: Basically learning how to use the power in the right way. The biggest thing is to get the biggest amount of power on the ground and go forward rather than wheelieing, spinning and pumping, because that's another problem you can have on these bikes. You need the right balance of everything.



Pol Espargaro on...riding the KTM

'I feel much more [at home on the KTM]. It is much easier to ride than the Yamaha but the only problem is that we are slow! This bike is quite different: if you push you get the lap-time. It is not like the Yamaha where you have to ride smoother to lower the lap-time. The philosophy is black-and-white.'

'The chassis is for sure different because you cannot turn as fast as the Yamaha and the engine is - wow - so different. It looks like this one is working better at high RPM while the Yamaha is at low RPM so they can take profit more of the grip in the beginning of the corner because they stress the tyre less. We need to work the tyre more. We still need to work...but this is the beginning. The bike still doesn't have a personality: we are building it. We are improving it and we know what it will be...'

'The engine means that it is more physically demanding to ride than the Yamaha but it means the rider can make the extra difference...the Yamaha looked like you needed to ride it into rails. I don't know if that will change with Maverick but when I was in Tech 3 it was like this; there was just one line and you had to follow it. With this bike there is more freedom and you can ride where you want. On this bike everything changes every lap: it is like a fight and you need to fight until the end.'

MOTOGP QATAR



ZZZZZZZZARCO...

Aside from the absorbing battle between Andrea Dovizioso, MotoGP's wise old owl and young gun supreme Maverick Viñales, the scale of surprise on show ensured 2017's floodlit curtain raiser in Qatar will live long in the memory....

Whether Valentino Rossi's inclusion in parc fermé after a shoddy winter of testing is worthy of wonder is open to debate, given the Italian's propensity to shine come Sunday. However, Aleix Espargaro and Aprilia's performance was, the Catalan equaling the Italian marque's best result in the four-stroke era with a metronomic ride to sixth. In fact, look all the way down the final top ten and there were names shocking some of the more established names. Scott Redding's woes from the Malaysian and Australian tests seem but a distant memory now he has switched front forks and recovered some front feeling. Jack Miller continued to display heightened maturity in a fine run to eighth. Rookie Alex Rins mixed it with five-time champ

Jorge Lorenzo and beat him on his class debut. Even Andrea Iannone – 15th in FP2 – put in a performance that was utterly in fitting with his self-labelled 'maniacal' nature.

Yet this all pales when cast alongside Johann Zarco's explosive debut. Has there been a rookie performance that has caught so many off-guard in living memory?

Yes, it ended in an unceremonious slide through the gravel, but what he did in those first six-and-a-bit laps was spectacular: the cut across Scott Redding and they jockeyed for turn one; the point and squirt under Marquez and Viñales on that exit; the consummate darting inside Iannone at turn six; and

the temerity to begin gapping men that have been in this class for three years plus thereafter. It's fair to assume Zarco wasn't the only one feeling, as he later put it, "a pain in the heart" the moment it all ended.

I write this fully aware that in Zarco, we're speaking of France's most successful GP exponent, a double world champion, and a man who boasts of a win haul in the intermediate class that is just one shy of Marquez, two of Lorenzo. It's also a given that he's aboard Yamaha's M1, widely accepted as the most 'neutral' of the grid's bikes. So why the surprise? Well, James Toseland aside, I can't recall Colin Edwards, Ben Spies, Cal Crutchlow or Pol Espargaro – all former world champions when joining Tech 3's ranks – getting anywhere near the front in their first handful of races.

And there has always been a temptation to treat Zarco's recent successes with a touch of suspicion. This largely stems from age. Unlike many of his

By Neil Morrison



contemporaries, the 26-year old hasn't risen through the junior categories at a meteoric rate.

Then there is his tendency to treat personal manager Laurent Fellon as some kind of minor deity, rapturously praising him as though he is the exalted leader of their very own two-man cult. And his temperament in the occasional big-pressure situation has been puzzling. Misano 2011 and Silverstone '16 quickly come to mind. But in Zarco, there is a rider adept at identifying his own weaknesses. Not just that. But in readily accepting them, he focuses largely on his strengths, working methodically on how to extrapolate them. On younger team-mate and fellow rookie Jonas Folger's splendid testing performances, Zarco was a of mixture of sincerity and calm.

"I'm not the kind of guy to do it all at once," he said at the Qatar test. "It makes me happy for him and also confident the bike and team know how to do it. When I see he's third I say, 'He's better than you at adapting faster. Take

your time.' He has this talent to understand quicker. It's maybe my weak point. [But] The bike is working. That makes me happy." It is rare to hear even the top riders speak with this kind of measured candour.

PERHAPS IT IS TIME TO RE-ASSESS WHAT WE THOUGHT ZARCO COULD DO IN HIS ROOKIE CAMPAIGN...

His canniness in selecting Michelin's soft rear tyre for the reduced 20-lap in Qatar was key. A four-lap dash on Friday evening with that rubber confirmed he could utilise it. Then he trusted in his own ability to maintain that pace.

But what really stood out was how Zarco attacked the occasion. Bear in mind, riders had two delays to contend with, as well as the contemplation of damp patches and kerbs in those 45 minutes that preceded the start. Rins admitted to feeling nerves, while Folger

fluffed his start, ending lap one 18th. There wasn't a hint of it in Zarco's demeanour as he hustled toward turn one. "I had this experience in Mugello last year. I could keep calm. Even here, I was feeling good. The more we were waiting, the more I was feeling that it was time to take the opportunity and go," he said.

Quite a start to life in MotoGP then. Early it may be, but perhaps it is time to re-assess what we thought Zarco could do in his rookie campaign. Fellon, also his personal coach, has set the bar high. "He was happy I did this," Zarco revealed post race. "He said, 'You still need to learn, train hard and you can dream about victories and podiums.'" Dreaming of the former may be a stretch, but bearing the Frenchman's form over the past two years in mind, the latter now seems entirely possible.



At some point between pulling into Parc Ferme and debriefing with his new Honda-backed BTT team after finishing second in a thrilling Moto3 dash, John McPhee must have experienced two forms of relief: one at grasping a result that firmly announced his intentions on the class for 2017 and another at finally having the resources to enjoy that competitiveness. Joan Mir may have won by just half a second after McPhee's slight wobble on the last lap allowed the Spaniard a crew bike length or two of distance but the Scot was arguably one of the aggressors in a pack that numbered thirteen slipping-and-streaming to be the 'head of the snake'. Here is what the 22 year old had to say fresh off the podium...

On whether a top three was initially realistic...

The podium was the target but I believed in pre-season testing and all weekend that we had a good chance of winning the race and even lap-by-lap I felt the same. I was almost playing with the guys to see where I could pass them and the engine was really strong. To win the race I had to come out of the last corner in second position and lined it all up perfectly but then with three corners to go I made a small mistake and thankfully nobody was able to pass me but unfortunately I wasn't able to get Joan.

On having the 'tools'...

It is probably the first time I haven't had a top speed issue! So a massive thanks to Honda because the bike was really strong all the way through the race. With my size and weight one of my strengths this year is corner exit and this helps massively in Moto3; these guys were on the same bike as me but still I could pass them down the straight. The biggest thing – with no disrespect to the bike from last year – is the whole package we have now. Honda have done a brilliant job to bring the new bike with all that top speed, and also all the support: from Dorna and Jeremy McWilliams and Alberto Puig – two heroes of mine that I look up to and then have been helping me with my training and how to prepare for the weekends. We almost changed our approach to the year knowing we have the package to win races.

On dealing with the frantic position-swapping...

There were a couple of times when I got into the lead and I knew I did not have the pace to breakaway because with the wind and everything it was too hard to break the pack; although it was something I had in the back of my mind and coming to the end of the race when some of the others' tyres might go off. I felt totally under control, and the speed of the engine meant that even if

I dropped back a bit I could stay with the group. The guys did a brilliant job with the pitboard telling me how many were in the group and who was behind me.

On finding more confidence...

It is more knowing the bike can work. Last year we were always looking for a tow or a slipstream and this year I know I can do the laps alone and I am more focussed on doing things my way rather than following the group. With Alberto and Jeremy helping me on track pinpointing areas or where I should be tipping in or braking better that is something I haven't had before. They are not telling me how to ride the bike but give me tips. I know in the back of my head that last year – OK, we had the win – but I did not really have the results to be given this opportunity. So I am 100% grateful for what I have been given. I have the chance to fight for wins week-in week-out and go for this championship; it is a proper turnaround.

On whether this form can be sustained...

I think there is more to come. Our bike at the moment is more or less the base setting and the way it comes. We have been limited with testing because we lost some days in Jerez and also here and haven't been able to explore as such. Having said that the bike is working really well and there will be a couple of things to work on to get that little bit stronger. I think the top five were all Hondas; so the base bike is good and it will be down to each rider to make the difference. It is nice for Honda after KTM winning the championship last year to come back with an all-top five at the first race.

On tangible relief...

100%; this is basically a thanks to everyone who has been behind me and always have been. I still have the same group there and they have always helped me to improve. It's nice to finally nice to have this opportunity to show what we always knew was possible. That's the best thing: the results do the talking and it's a really nice feeling.



MOTOGP QATAR



0 FEATURE

A ROYAL ROW

VISITING **WORLD CHAMPIONS 99**
IN ANDORRA

Words and iPhone snaps by Adam Wheeler



Andorra is not a place where you find yourself by accident. Squeezed into 34 kilometres (just 14 wide) between France and Spain and famed for being a financial 'void' it is a hefty three-hour trip from Barcelona for what is normally the easiest route to cross the border and 'Duana' customs line. Andorra might be a haven for the wealthy but it is also a playground of natural beauty: the mountains home to epic ski escapes in the winter and treks, trails, bicycles when the sunshine arrives.

For several reasons Andorra attracts athletes that largely live their lives around a training schedule and a degree of regime,

and for people like Jorge Lorenzo it fills a purpose. Outside of his career concerns Lorenzo also chose the capital of Andorra la Vella to make curious post-racing experiment with the 'World Champions 99' museum/bar/restaurant/event space that was opened in December 2016. The principal motivation was to showcase some of the vast collection of sporting memorabilia that the Majorcan has been swapping, bidding and buying for almost a decade and only a small slice of his archive is on display in Andorra.

The first sensation that hits you upon entry to the location (already a tasty Ducati Panigale takes pride of place in one of



the large windows) is the presentation and open plan organisation. It feels a little like a MotoGP team hospitality but the heritage aspect to the venue means large photos and quotes of motorsport heroes like Barry Sheene loom from the walls. The large wrap of the upper balcony is covered with MotoGP fans and crowd, which is a different and engaging touch. The presence of consoles and simulators, an official merchandise store in the corner and the obligatory large screen add to the 'Sports Bar' feel. We didn't sample any of the food due to time constraints but a quick eye around the bar indicates that any offerings will be fresh and something not simply bunged in a microwave.

We get a rapid tour of the museum from General Manager of the site Javier Ledesma. 'I've known Jorge for fifteen years and probably one of the few since the early days when he started with the Copa Aprilia and then through the years with Derbi and Honda,' he says. 'I was then away from the track for a while but we started together again about four years ago when he changed management. I've been president of the fan club for a few years now.'

After the interview we go back for a slower and more considered look. The gallery is not so big and can be passed in twenty-thirty minutes but the range of suits from the likes of Jim Clarke and Graham Hill (incredibly basic fireproof 'pyjamas' with name and bloodtype ominously printed on the upper torso) up until Lewis Hamilton and then on





two-wheels from Sheene and his 76-77 leathers through to the likes of Lorenzo's great rivals like Rossi, Stoner and Marquez provide a fascinating look at how technology and protection has progressed. Lorenzo's own personal stash of trophies, leathers and lids – even the title-winning Yamaha M1 from Valencia - (still with the technical control stamp from that remarkable Grand Prix in place) is there for viewing. The information about the champions and the sports are detailed and well laid out but perhaps some more interactive elements (or stories/atmosphere from the eras – even some of Jorge's personal anecdotes concerning his past and present competitors) would enhance the experience further.

We have a look around the shop and unfortunately don't have the time to take a lap on the comprehensive gaming set-up but the presence of so many other names and merchandise is further evidence that this is far from a vanity project for Lorenzo. In fact it is hard to think of many places similar to this; Yamaha's Communications Plaza and Honda's Motegi museum are mammoth time capsules to their

own story but World Champions 99 feels more personal and intimate by focussing on the sportsman rather than their tools.

Javier; explain how Jorge's memorabilia hunt came to be World Champions 99...

Well, for a number of years Jorge has been collecting keepsakes from world champions in Formula One, 500s and MotoGP and he proposed to open a themed restaurant, so for two years we were looking in places like Barcelona, Palma de Mallorca and other cities to launch this project. A year and a half ago we landed in Andorra and we discovered a series of conditions that led us to establish here and now it is three months since we've been open. And it is not only motorsport: Jorge also has pieces from people like Rafa Nadal, Andrea Iniesta, Alberto Tomba and people like Lance Armstrong, gloves from Muhammad Ali. So the idea is to bring sporting world champions together. Here in Andorra it is only about motorsport but the overall idea is to look at a franchise and model along the lines of a Hard Rock Café but in the world of motorsport. We have a few locations, one in



Spain and another in Asia and so we are looking at the next step.

So how was Jorge involved?

He is a perfectionist and looks at the small details. He's like he is with his career. He was very particular about little things at the venue like the application of the photos, the texts about the riders and drivers, presentation of the mannequins and even the decals and stickers around the place. He really wanted to be on top on everything. Although he obviously cannot be here as much as we'd like because of the world championship schedule he is involved in all the decisions and doesn't want any aspect of this place to pace him by.



Did he always have this idea since he started gathering artefacts or was it a proposal that gathering steam?

He had all of this material at home and always had the intention someday to make an exhibition for fans and lovers of sport; the chance to see these items like Ayrton Senna's helmet or the sixteen years of suits that Michael Schumacher had in his F1 career. He is just missing one year but is trying hard to get it. He also had the four championship winning suits from Sebastian Vettel. He is always keeping a look out for more. So the goal was to help him realise this and also create a business interest that will be there for him one day when he retires.

So this site in Andorra is almost like a trial for future and to see how people react to it...?

can run any kind of event.

What are the advantages of being in Andorra?

It is complicated being here! But in terms of support and help we have from the government then everything worked out quickly. We found support from the bank and also an important partner in Grupo Pyrenees who were another to back us fast once they knew our plans and what Jorge wanted to do. All these points added up to this place being correct for a first try.

Have you seen any surprises of people who can come through the door?

Obviously the main group has been fans of motorsport, but the fact that there are many riders living in Andorra is interesting and we'd like to think it would be an easy and comfortable place for them to

LORENZO: "I THINK IT IS A GOOD IDEA BECAUSE IT IS A NEW ONE, AND WASN'T IN THE MARKET: A PLACE WHERE MOTORSPORT LOVERS CAN BE, TALK, BUY MERCHANDISE PLAY ON SIMULATORS AND SEE SOME HISTORY OF THE SPORT. RACES. IF IT WORKS IN ANDORRA THEN I HOPE WE CAN GROW TO OTHER PLACES..."

Of course. There is a personal challenge to open in Palma de Mallorca and we are [talking] with various possible investors and we want to reach the level of being a franchise; so we provide all the logistical support but the site is controlled by the investor in each zone or place. Apart from the museum we also serve food and have the possibility to be a evening bar. We also have the shop. So it is versatile and can entertain families, host businesses functions or parties. It has a wide use and can accommodate up to 200 people and seated almost 70; so it

hang out. We have a section where riders and drivers can come and enjoy themselves and also eat the kind of food that they normally need do. In three months we seen a variety of use here. Recently we had a Harley party, a Ducati members club gathering and we also have a large screen for bike and F1 races. The idea is to have a comfortable atmosphere for motorsport fans but also anybody who wants to stop by and enjoy something a bit different. We also do guided visits of the museum so people can learn even more about the collection we have.

Jorge has been spotted here a few times...?

He likes to come and I know he'd like to be here more but I know his agenda is very busy. He usually tries to come in one or two times a month and when we can talk about new ideas and new pieces he might have coming or want to show. He is normally thinking and wants to talk about what can be offered to visitors. The museum is very visual and another aspect will be the interactive dimension; we want the visitor to interact with some of the videos or screens we have and see all the information they want on the drivers or riders we have and things like anecdotes as much as results and achievements.

We see #99 himself in Qatar a few weeks later for the first round of MotoGP and over an interview and a drink (coffee for us, carrot juice for him) we ask him where he is with his current 'shopping'. 'I am looking a little bit less now,' he smiles. '20-30% of the pieces I swap with other riders and drivers and others I buy from collectors. It is a little bit like a drug...if you don't stop you are finished! So I calmed down a bit but if I see a special piece then I go for it. There are still some drivers or riders I don't have, like Phil Read, and Jackie Stewart and Fangio in Formula One. With Schumacher I started with one suit and now I have seventeen from his career and I am just missing one. It is a never-ending passion.'

Lorenzo also admits to having a 'small' collection of sports cars and has his own sunglasses company with the firm 'Skull Riders'. World Champions 99 is another effort that could signal the second phase of his life and one after racing. 'Apart from money I think you need to have goals and projects in your life; to have that motivation,' he muses. 'I think that is very important....'



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DETROIT

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450SX winner: Eli Tomac, Kawasaki

250SX East Coast winner: Jordan Smith, KTM

ET TIGHTENS THE SCREW







We've officially got ourselves a series here in America! 2017 Monster Energy Supercross has just five rounds left and both classes saw some upheaval this past weekend in Detroit. A sparse crowd saw Monster Energy Kawasaki's Eli Tomac take his fourth 450SX win in a row and TLD KTM's Jordon Smith take his first career 250SX win in a race that couldn't possibly be nuttier.

First though, the 450's. Tomac's win was not only his fourth in a row but his seventh in the last nine races. And in one of those, he had a front brake issue early while in third. Tomac is simply on another level right now and watching his pass on early leader, Marvin Musquin of the Red Bull KTM squad, was pretty impressive. Tomac took a much longer outside line in the sand and even though Musquin made no mistake on the inside, Eli powered around the KTM rider like he was a B rider.

Tomac, once over a race down in the points to Ryan Dungey (also of the Red Bull KTM team), Tomac's narrowed that gap down to just seven points with five races to go. Win the next two, no matter where Dungey finishes and we'll have a new points leader. It's been an sterling run for Tomac after a slow start to the year. The frustrations got so bad that at one point after a poor race at round two in San Diego, Tomac didn't meet with the team after the race, he was so frustrated at his bike, probably at the team and I'm sure, mostly, at himself.

But Tomac being Tomac, his mood after Detroit wasn't celebratory. Nope, there's still work to do and backslaps can wait until he actually pulls this run off. "...for me it's still the same goal. I don't know. I'm still the guy behind. Just try to keep doing what I'm doing," Tomac said at the press conference. "We only have five more left. It's nice to close the gap a little bit for sure, but still the guy chasing, so I won't be happy until we actually, if we do, make up that point gap."

For Dungey (more on him in my blog) another mystifying ride where he battled with RM KTM's Davi Millsaps for way longer than he would have liked to, or maybe longer than he ever had. His big points lead now reduced, Dungey's got to figure something out to change his riding or he'll be an answer to a bench race question of who lost the biggest points lead in supercross history next to Damon Bradshaw in 1992 or David Vuillemin in 2002. Ryan appeared to be pretty upset last week with the way he rode but on Saturday, handled things a little better.



Marvin Musquin held on for second and cost his teammate two points in the title hunt [when will team orders kick-in? Ed] and then it was the teammates of Blake Baggett and Davi Millsaps after that. So if you're counting at home it was a Kawasaki, four KTM's and then a Husqvarna which is a KTM in sheep's clothing. Austria didn't take the top step but they took just about every other damn one.

Millsaps battled Dungey hard in search of his first podium in four years and in the end gave so much of himself that he couldn't stop Baggett from motoring by either late in the race.

"There's been a lot of adversity for me since the off-season, and since Oakland and Atlanta" explained Millsaps "There's a lot of things that are wrong with me that I'm trying to work through and figure out how to work through them and still stay in shape and get better and make it happen. For me, I had a pretty big endo about three laps to go. It really took it out of me. It was a bad endo. I don't know how I saved it. I thought I was dead."

So as the 450SX class gets real serious, the 250SX class took its own dramatic turn with points leader Zach Osborne of the Rockstar Husqvarna team crashing in the first turn and being forced to pull into the pits for a new front wheel. Osborne re-entered the race two laps down and was fortunate to score two points on the night.

The new points leader is Monster Pro Circuit's Joey Savatgy who scored second place with a crash. In fact, Savatgy passed leader Jordon Smith of the TLD KTM team right before the last lap and was on the outside of a turn that let Smith get by for his first career victory.

More talk afterwards about the practice aggression in the class that saw Osborne and Pro Circuit's Adam Cianciarulo get into it last week and this week it was GEICO Honda's Christian Craig who punted TLD KTM's Alex Martin off the track. Craig's hit, while meant to send a message, wasn't intended to send Martin off the track and out of the race, and possibly series, with an injury.

That was enough for the FIM and they fined Craig and gave him last gate pick for the main so even though Craig won the heat, he was forced outside. And Cianciarulo and Osborne have been placed on a watch list. All the riders in the class have expressed belief that this practice "stuff" has got to stop.

"I'm going to say it and I might shoot myself in the foot," said Savatgy "But you watch the 450 class, none of those guys do that. It's a whole different maturity level and a respect level. The deal with Osborne and AC, that escalated obviously and that went way too far. And the other day with Craig and Martin, that wasn't cool."

Smith though was elated about his win having to go through the LCQ to do it after an aggressive (there's that word again) pass on JGR Suzuki's Kyle Cunningham in the heat

that left them both on the ground. Smith's start, from the 18th gate pick, was pretty amazing and he became the first rider since 2003 to win the LCQ and then the main event in the 250SX class.

"It was a crazy race with a lot of people making mistakes and Joey (Savatgy) and I going back and forth a lot. My adrenaline was going out there. Just super happy to get the win."

Star Yamaha's Dylan Ferrandis, a rookie from the MXGP series, led nine laps of the race and looked to be at least able to scrounge a podium from the ride but dropped back to fourth at the end as Cianciarulo zapped him late. Not making a lot of friends in the class - then again, who is? - Ferrandis and Cianciarulo got into a heat battle early in the main.

"I came in on Ferrandis after the finish line and I'm like, Joey's going to get us both here 100%. I'm like, I do not care," said Cianciarulo after the race. "I ran interference for Joey and then Joey pushed him down the straightaway. I seriously was laughing in my helmet. It was awesome."

The 250SX east class has been something else this year with the drama that seems to start even before the night show. Savatgy's got the lead with three races left but the top four are all within eleven points of each other so it's still really anyone's game from here on out. IF there are any survivors left by the end!





SUPERCROSS DETROIT

Tense times for Zach Osborne who at least salvaged two points from what was a disaster in Detroit. No red plate for the Husqvarna rider at St Louis but will there be anyone more determined to take it back?



Only Dylan Ferrandis will know why he couldn't close out a first milestone SX victory; the Frenchman is getting close to the Gallic Supercross 'club' though



SUPERCROSS DETROIT





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WHAT'S EATING RYAN DUNGEY...?

Apologies for the rip off of a famous Racer X cover story on Jeff Emig, the 1997 450SX champion, who was now struggling badly in 1998 but I feel this applies to our 2016 450SX champion who no longer quite looks like himself out there...

Ryan Dungey has been a picture of consistency for so long now; we almost take it for granted that he'll be there each and every week. Until this year it had been two seasons since he scored more than one fourth place finish in a series. Yeah, his rival Ryan Villopoto captured four straight 450SX championships in a row but Dungey was in many ways more consistent than Villopoto in that run. It's just that RV's levels of excellence were a tad higher.

This year's been weird. Dungey, always in phenomenal shape, has been caught, passed and dropped late in races by his teammate Marvin Musquin. Dungey, always an amazing starter, can't seem to get up there all the time. Dungey, always one of the fastest qualifiers, sits outside the top five in average qualifying times. It's

been 'Bizarro Ryan Dungey' in 2017 made even stranger with the fact that he's still got the points lead with five races left.

Never before has a rider who's a three-time 450SX champion and has the points lead, been written and talked about in a manner to make one think he was fifth or similar. But this feels different and it's so out of character that it's slowly becoming a story. Just two wins, his points lead reduced from more than a race to just seven with five races to go and puzzling podium interviews about how it's "life is more than just a dirt bike race" when he has a bad race has left many people in the paddock wondering what's going on.

Dungey's not doing a lot of talking outside of the press conferences so it's hard to figure out if he's battling an ill-

ness or an injury but from people I speak to around "camp Dungey" it doesn't seem to be that. Those same people say the longer main events that have been causing the tracks to break down has been an issue and this is something that Ryan's been critical of at past races. The lack of dirt in the tracks have made for some sketchy moments where it's down to the concrete before the main event starts and the ruts get deeper and deeper. Pushing outside his comfort limit is not something that Dungey feels like doing at this point. There have also been some bike testing issues with Ryan not able to get to Florida and on the softer dirt as early as he would've liked to. Never one to just ride his bike with a set-up week to week, Dungey's been generally fiddling with the KTM 450SX-F more and more this year.

By Steve Matthes



His Red Bull KTM contract up at the end of the year, some have speculated that this could be it for Dungey and perhaps he's wanting to go out without an injury. It's a bit unusual that a top rider like Ryan hasn't re-upped by now and I spoke to team manager Roger DeCoster about it a few weeks ago. DeCoster didn't say which way Dungey was leaning but said that there's a deal waiting for him the moment he decides that he wants to come back racing and that Roger, nor KTM, was going to pressure him into it. DeCoster said that Ryan's earned the right to make a decision when he wants to.

Dungey's never been one to have the raw speed of a Villopoto or Roczen so the fact that Eli Tomac, who's absolutely on rails right now, is beating him isn't that big of a shock. It's the fact that Dungey seems powerless to stop charges from Musquin late in the race or that he loses touch with Tomac in the races. He turned some bad starts into some decent finishes

in Toronto and Daytona but there's no doubt he wasn't his usual self in ripping through the pack passing riders he used to just drop. Ryan Dungey is, for perhaps the first time, looking, well, human.

The plotline is made even richer with the fact that he's training and riding with Musquin during the week at Aldon Baker's place. By all accounts things are fine down there in Florida and there haven't been an issue but in my experience it wouldn't take much by Musquin in a race to ignite some tensions. Although Marv is perhaps one of the nicest riders on and off the track in the sport so maybe nothing happens but top dogs riding with each other during the week is usually something that doesn't work.

And a couple of riders that have given Dungey fits in recent weeks have been some KTM riders Blake Baggett and Davi Millsaps of the RM KTM team. The team gets factory support from KTM (their bikes are

probably 90% of what Dungey, Musquin and Trey Canard have) and both Baggett and Millsaps have been right there. Baggett's been very fast all year and just small mistakes have held him back from collecting more than his one podium. Millsaps raced Dungey hard for more than twelve minutes this past weekend in Detroit before eventually giving way. It may be a bit early for team tactics to help Dungey out for this title but one has to think that this situation could get a little sticky for the team as the races wind down.

So whatever is going with Ryan Dungey, it's going to be interesting to see if he can rebound and fight back against this Tomac train that's been whittling away at his lead for over a month now. From all his race wins and titles, if he manages to win this 2017 450SX crown it might mark his most significant achievement because he's clearly fighting more than just Tomac.

By Adam Wheeler
Photos by Ray Archer

GAJSER POUNDS NEUQUEN

MXGP heads to Mexico
this week hoping for more
of the finery enjoyed in
Patagonia





MXGP ARGENTINA

There was little doubt that the MXGP World Champion found an extra centimetre or two in his factory CRF450RW throttle cable for what was the first show of strength by Tim Gajser and the new Honda this season. Argentina and the delectable setting of Patagonia cheered the paddock for the third year in a row and improved moods after the climate-shock of Indonesia two weeks previously that wrecked athletes' moral and conditioning as much as the motorcycles (MX2 holeshotter and sixteen year old podium finisher Jorge Prado was just one suffering with a cold after the Pangkal Pinang mess). Gajser had recovered from his virus and the weakened state that meant he had little riposte to Tony Cairoli's ferocious form at Qatar.

The twenty year old Slovenian headed every session on the Neuquen terrain that again fooled some of the best in MXGP and MX2; appearances were deceptive. Underneath the immaculately prepared and presented volcanic dirt was a hard and slick base with some horrid edges and Cairoli was a victim as were riders like Romain Febvre.

Gajser ruled both motos but not before Monster Energy Kawasaki's Clement Desalle showed more fiery starting prowess and Monster Energy Yamaha's Jeremy Van Horebeek

provided another peak of form; it remains to be seen if the Belgian can maintain the same rhythm and potential across the following rounds. Cairoli's fightback to seventh overall was achieved with some hard action in a crowded pack where tenth place in each outing was only around thirty seconds down on the red #243. The Sicilian claimed to be disappointed that his speed did not allow him to push Gajser as he'd done so effectively and calculatedly at Losail but from the moment the #222 450 SX-F hit the ground early in both sprints then the former champion was on damage-control.

MX2 was all about the resurgent Red Bull KTM duo of Prado and a reassured Pauls Jonass. The Latvian looked every inch a title contender at round one and this second 1-1 of his career restocked some of the confidence that was sucked into the bog of Indonesia along with his racebike. Kemea Yamaha's Benoit Paturel will need to make a statement fairly soon of his increased competitiveness and seize the earliest opportunity to ruin Jonass' momentum while Jeremy Seewer's second podium of the year (only one of three riders to do so from three rounds) allowed the Swiss to start a strategy of consistency on the factory Suzuki that should swiftly put the 22 year old in position as favourite for 2017.

Argentina seemed to mix a good vibe, the typical enthusiasm of the fans that had flocked to pack-out the nearby town of Villa la Angostura and a track that looked sensational and speedy. MXGP was back on course in terms of what fans and viewers could expect from a series that certainly hasn't shown any predictable traits from the first five motos of the year.



MXGP ARGENTINA

Red Bull KTM MX2 Team Manager Dirk Gruebel claimed that the battle between his two riders was intense and close enough for a few extra grey hairs...the fans lapped it up





MXGP ARGENTINA





The results don't show it...but Cairoli is still one of the fastest and most in-form riders in MXGP





MXGP ARGENTINA





MXGP ARGENTINA



Win number two for Pauls Jonass and as much relief as elation after the decidedly deflating experience of Indonesia. How can Paturel and Seewer respond at Leon this weekend

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GEARING UP TO NORMALITY...

The Grand Prix of Argentina was a 'gear-lever kick' back to MXGP normality: crowds, anticipation and track that frustrated and toyed with riders but also invited them to risk and alternate lines and strategies...



The way some of the riders attacked the Neuquen layout and volcanic earth terrain beggared belief. There was a degree of catharsis in Patagonia. The Qatar swansong was the usual first-round anomaly in the calendar and Indonesia rewarded the fortunate and the technical and was freakily harsh to some due to the course conditions. Riders like 2015 World Champion Romain Febvre were putting out messages on social media alluding to a 'our season starts now' philosophy prior to Argentina. I believe some of the nerves and angst bottled from the trips to the middle east and Asia were dispelled in the rural setting of Neuquen.

In terms of track state and scheduling, MXGP will be spoilt once more this coming weekend with the Grand Prix of Mexico. Soon there will be palpable relief at the European stage of the season clicking into gear with meetings in Italy and Holland in April but this will also be the kick-off for EMX European Championship classes and the recent

issues of track preparation and degradation will again come to the fore with so many categories, sessions and varying lines eating into some older circuits that could well struggle with the load.

Youthstream became far more shrewd with their organisation and prep through 2016. The previous year tracks were the hot potato and the main cause of gripe for the principal stars and characters in MXGP. The improvement was noticeable, but with a new season comes a new evaluation. The first European-set Grand Prix is also a bit of an 'ask'. Pietramurata in Arco di Trento probably wins the award for the most scenic MXGP landscape through its location at the foot of the Dolomite mountains but the site is compact, tight and a logistic headache for the paddock and scores of EMX250 and WMX hopefuls that will add to the congestion. Of course some decent weather will cover some frustrations and MXGP will only have a few days before it packs out the more capable Eurocircuit in Valkenswaard, Holland.

By Adam Wheeler



Scratchy and stony hard-pack to bumpy and hard sand: MXGP certainly never lacks diversity in the challenge.

I've had a few people asking me about the (frankly) ground-breaking news of the alliance between MX Sports and Youthstream for the future of MXGP in the United States as well as a footing for the Motocross of Nations. Allegedly the announcement about Floridian track Gatorback running the Grand Prix in September is imminent. The recent press conference at Daytona was a fitting declaration of intent and I think it will be fascinating to see what developments can be made public as 2017 gets older.

There will undoubtedly be many nuts and bolts behind the coalition when it comes to any event itself (and I hope all are securely fastened in the interests of Grand Prix's future existence in North America) which means the USGP will be promoted and supported quite unlike it has been before.

Where the dialogue and relationship between the companies gets very fruity is in the discussions about how (or should) the AMA and FIM worlds can be brought together. American fandom for MXGP might not be particularly high (as brutally evidenced by the turnout at Glen Helen in recent editions of the GP although Florida is untapped turf as yet) but a promoter and man-of-the-sport such as Davey Coombs knows that putting athletes and brands like Cairoli, Gasjer, Desalle, KTM, HRC, Yamaha on the same bill as the main stars of the American motocross scene will create a weekend line-up that will capture major international attention, and no doubt impress some of the sponsors fixed on the Lucas Oil series' sheet. It is the 'Nations away from the Nations'. Potentially all the best together at a racing circuit worthy of the fixture: it is a tremendous prospect and I really hope the two 'Davids' – Coombs and Luongo – have turned the possibility over and slated a National/MXGP for genesis.





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► PAULS JONASS



THE FRESHMEN

By Adam Wheeler
Photos by Ray Archer

BRITAIN'S BURGEONING
MXGP HOPES





In 2017 there is a trio of young British riders plying their trade in the MX2 class of the FIM Motocross World Championship for three different teams and brands – two of those with direct factory links. For the three – Conrad Mewse (17 years old Rockstar Energy Husqvarna), Adam Sterry (20, Monster Energy Kawasaki) and Ben Watson (19, Hitachi KTM Contract Furnisher Group UK) – '17 marks the second year of Grand Prix education. For Watson it is actually the third term but a broken foot at round three of 2016 in Argentina kept the Red Bull-backed athlete on the sidelines for the entire slate.

Aside from being the elite of their generation for the UK and the rolling wave to follow Grand Prix winners like Tommy Searle (MX2), Shaun Simpson (MXGP) and Max Anstie (MX2) into the fray, all three have also earned their spurs with race victories in the stacked cut-and-thrust of the EMX250 European Championship. There is no over-hyping involved here. Both Mewse and Watson hopped out of EMX250 early to advance their potential in MX2 while Sterry had an authentic stab at grasping the coveted title in 2015.



MEWSE: “I THINK A PODIUM THIS YEAR IS A REASONABLE GOAL. I HOPE FOR THE BEST FOR ADAM. THE SAME WITH BEN. WE ALL WORK HARD AND PUSH TO BE THE BEST AND IT’S NICE TO HAVE SOME BRITISH COMPANY IN THE CLASS. WE ARE ALL SIMILAR...”

On paper each have a different story and status: Sterry has taken the factory Kawasaki seat of Jeffrey Herlings’ closest threat for the last two seasons (Dylan Ferrandis) after numerous years on KTM machinery. Watson is on the comeback trail but could swiftly re-establish his name as one of the

most prestigious junior talents to filter through the ranks and Mewse rebounded from disappointment as part of KTM’s Junior Team (that also housed current Red Bull KTM factory rider Jorge Prado and New Zealand’s Josiah Natzke) to find a reenergizing home with Jacky Martens prolific development squad.

THE FRESHMEN: BEST OF BRITS



With the Grand Prix campaign still so young we sourced some 'orientation' from Mewse, Sterry and Watson and also threw in some cheeky thoughts on the season-ending Motocross of Nations (fittingly at Matterley Basin in the UK) and the ultimate 'cap' for any aspiring MX racer...



0 MXGP
FEATURE



BEN WATSON

Ben, after almost a year away you are now like a mystery in this class...is the field and speed also a slight mystery for you?

Yeah, 100%. Obviously I didn't do any races from April 2016 until Hawkstone Park this February! I still don't really know what to expect and how I should be feeling after these first few races. I think what I went through means I'm more excited about the season coming rather than being nervous.

It would be natural if you were a little rusty but how ready did you feel for Grand Prix considering all that metalwork that went into rebuilding your foot?

I would say I was more ready than 2016: way ahead. When last season finished I was ready to go [for 2017]. I had quite a long break with the injury because it was physically impossible to do anything. I was non-weight bearing on my left leg for twelve weeks and partially for another six; so I was sofa-bound for a long time. I took my mind totally away from racing and didn't even look at a bike. I kinda focussed on family stuff and a life without motocross. That brought back a load of motivation and made me realise why I loved it. It made me want to race so much and get into the lifestyle that I was used to.

What about the set-up you have now? You are back on the KTM after a year with Husky but the season before last – also with a 250 SX-F – was complicated with some gremlins and other issues...

It's great. Last year I only knew two weeks before the trip that I'd be in Qatar. This time it has always been part of the plan to do all the rounds. I've had a lot more time to prepare mentally and obviously a lot on the bike. I didn't get a 2016 bike until January last year

so I only had a month on it before Qatar. This year we have a lot more resources and I feel a lot more comfortable.

Motocross – and sport generally – can be pretty cruel. It was only a year and a half ago that you were rated as one of the brightest young prospects in Grand Prix. How will it be to get back to that status?

I'd have to say that the first two years in GPs for me have been disastrous. Nobody was able to see what I could do. I had bike problem after bike problem in the first season and last year I broke my foot straight away. I feel like I haven't been able to show my potential once. I just want to get through the first few rounds, plug away and then really show something. Hopefully by the end of the year I can get a good championship result but more than anything I just want to show my speed. So many people will get injured and I've had my bad luck; [so now] I want to enjoy it. I don't know if people believe in me any more or what, but I don't think about that side of it and will just get on with it.

Only one rider in MX2 had won a GP before Qatar. Going to Mexico then we are still waiting for another podium debutant but it should be a year of surprises. Would you count yourself as a dark horse in that mix?

I don't know...I'm still nineteen and I have four more years left in MX2 but I want to prove myself as soon as I can. Part of the excitement for me is not really knowing what I can do: I could be disappointed or I can make a shock. I do believe in myself and that I can do it and it just has to happen once. That one good result will give me that extra drive and I won't want anything less.

CONRAD MEWSE

Conrad, the flyaways are a 'first' for you after coming into the MX2 class late last year. The goal was EMX250 but you switched up quickly in 2016. How is it going into '17?

Good. It's nice to come over and do the over-seas and it's my first time. A lot has been going on the last two years with joining the new team and changing from EMX to MX2, so it has been a bit of a crazy time. I'm finally settled now with a good set-up and the bike is really good. I want to get some points on the board and keep it rolling.

I guess full-on MX2 meant a new regime for fitness and training...

We started very early with the physical training, even before the winter actually. We had a month off and then focussed on the physical side and then jumped on the bike. We knew what we needed to be working on. It was new but in a strange way...a lot more intense, which is what I felt I was missing actually. I took on a new trainer, Rasmus Jorgensen, and everything seems to be going well and I completely trust his programme. We have a good connection and we're working more as a team.

You're based in Holland full-time now?

Yes, before I was heading back to England quite a lot just to be home but now I've moved in with an English family that have come over. Their son rides as well and it is great for me. I feel like I have a home in Holland now. I couldn't really have it any better at the moment: I have the Bintcliffe family helping me back in Europe and then the team couldn't do enough for me at the races.

With Thomas Covington having Grand Prix experience, Thomas Kjer Olsen as European Champion and yourself on the roster how do you feel about your place in the team?

We have three strong riders and when we go out practicing it is very close. We push ourselves to the limits and do the best we can do. We all have our place in the team. Nobody is like 'well, I'm the number one...' Jacky [Martens, Team Manager/owner] is a great guy and he knows how to run a team. It is very organised and we never go without. Jacky and I have a good relationship, and in the past I haven't always been comfortable with my team boss to be able to say some things. Now I feel like I am at home here.

The KTM Junior team was almost like the famed Vangani set-up from the early '00s (Townley, Rattray and Leok) but it wasn't the best experience for you. The results didn't come...

Yeah, obviously the KTM experience did not really go to plan for me in terms of results and things like that. I got dropped and came to this team...but to be honest I was happy. It was not a situation where I looked around me and thought 's**t, this is not very good...' I couldn't have asked for a better team and I can't thank them enough for taking me on after some tough times on the 125s. I feel that we're working great and I hope they don't regret giving me that chance!

Are you set here for the future?

In Lommel [Grand Prix of Belgium] last year we ripped the contract up and signed a new one for two years. So I have all of 2017 and 2018 which I'm more than happy with.



THE FRESHMEN: BEST OF BRITS

MX2 is an open book this year isn't it?

Definitely. In the last two seasons I think we have seen a lot of the top guys move up and it has affected the class majorly and it is very different now. I am looking forward to see how the season goes. I think it will be very interesting and any of the top ten guys can win the world championship. It will be nice to get in and mix things up with the front-runners.

Do you think you can look at the podium this year? Some of your challenges might come from your countrymen...

Everyone would love to get a podium [for the first time]. I believe in myself and I'd love to get some consistent top five finishes. I think a podium this year is a reasonable goal. Adam had a good season last year and he deserved that factory ride and to be on a team like that. I hope he has a great season with them. The same with Ben. We all work hard and push to be the best and it's nice to have some British company in the class.

We are all similar. For me on the British scene it has worked a bit differently because I was picked up on a factory team quite early and left to Europe and most of the rounds of the Dutch Championship clashed with the British [championship]. I do try my best to get back and do a British round when I can and hopefully it won't affect my relationship with British fans; they seem to be OK with me at the British Grand Prix. I hope they will support me as much as the other Brits.

Can you imagine being on the Nations trio and the MX2 entry at Matterley?

As soon as it was revealed to be at Matterley Basin I couldn't stop grinning for about two days. I want a great season and I finished 2016 well but I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about the MX2 slot on the team. It has always been my dream since I was a kid to be on the Nations squad and for it to be in England this time it is pretty special. I cannot imagine what the atmosphere will be like.



ADAM STERRY

THE FRESHMEN: BEST OF BRITS

Adam, joining this team based in the south of France was a quite a big step. How has it been settling in...?

Of course the majority of the team is French but they are all nice people. They do everything professionally and correctly and everything I need to get the job done. My practice and race mechanic is British and the crew all speak English so it is not a massive step. Steve's team [Wilvo KTM, Sterry's former squad of three seasons] was a private one – although one of the best in the paddock at that level in terms of how it was set-up and run - and here there is a lot bigger budget and it's another 'step'. With that comes pressure for the results but they have the history and the tools to do the job.

Can you give an example of a way in which it is 'another step'?

Just in the development of the bike, parts and the attitude; it is tricky to explain it well but it is like the performance matters more than the cost. If something will make the bike better then the team will do it. I was struggling with the starts and the new metal grid and the team went to work straightaway on the options and the changes we could make. We kept going and the starts were better in Indonesia and then again before Argentina. I feel that we are always progressing.

It must be slightly daunting dropping into Dylan Ferrandis' place?

Ferrandis was a moto and Grand Prix winner so they are big shoes to fill...but I still have three years in the class so I will get to that point and hopefully soon and for the same team. The team could not have been more welcoming and the same for Kawasaki and I liked the bike the moment I got on it. The engine is really strong and when we get to Europe we'll improve it further; we are still a little bit on the safe side for these flyaways but with another step we'll hopefully be battling for podiums.

How do you feel about the sense of unknown with MX2 this year?

Coming in I knew it would be wide-open. You have [Benoit] Paturel, [Jeremy] Seewer and [Pauls] Jonass pretty much there all weekend but other than that it is pretty equal and there isn't anybody who is stand-out faster than anybody else; like it has been the last few years. Everyone has a chance to get on the podium or win a moto. It is very close and makes for good racing.

What's the objective in terms of learning this year?

I would say that step-up in pressure that is quite difficult. It is not that I'm riding tight or anything but if I am brutally honest then it is just about getting out of the start; if that happens then I'm alright because my times in the sessions are good. We are only three rounds in and things haven't gone too great and I haven't scored [points] in two motos due to getting stuck in that bog in Indonesia and then a coming-together with [Julien] Lieber in the first moto in Argentina. So we are working on things...but that was the biggest change I had to deal with.

I asked Conrad about the Nations. It is a long time away but the chance of having that MX2 slot must be in the back of the mind somewhere...

I haven't thought too much about it, simply because there is so much to do before then and it is far away but to be picked for the Nations at Matterley Basin...f**k it would be my first one and to do it there?! I cannot imagine anything better. Since I was a little kid I've dreamt of that. I was at Matterley in 2006 [the last edition of the Nations at the Winchester venue] as a ten year old and I still have the book at home where I ran around getting all the autographs I could.

ON THE NEW PATH

ANDREA WILSON WAS ARMED WITH A
CAMERA AND AN OPINION AFTER THE FIRST
TWO ROUNDS OF AMERICAN FLAT TRACK
AND A NEW DAWN...

Blog & pics by Andrea Wilson













AFT 2017: SO FAR



SOME ANSWERS...

Going into the 2017 American Flat Track season opener there was a host of unknowns in this new era of the discipline. But now that some of the dust has settled after two rounds we have some answers...

The Cream Always Rises To The Top

Normally you'd wager that the factory guys would top the field but those 'favour-ites' were on unproven machines. Added to that, no one was sure what would happen when the Twins took to a TT track and a Short Track for the first time. Well, the folks at American Flat Track weren't going to waste any time building intrigue and started the season with the Daytona TT and the Atlanta Short Track.

It didn't take long for an answer either. The sport's best are still the sport's best: Jared Mees scored back-to-back wins for Indian Motorcycle, making history as the first on the FTR750 and a personal milestone by completing a dirt track

grand slam (TT, Short Track, Half-Mile and Mile wins). His rival and fellow Indian rider – Bryan Smith – scored a pair of podiums to stay right on Mees' tail in the championship. So, new year, same story: Smith vs. Mees or Mees vs. Smith. It's hard to separate the two, even though they'd both prefer to be separated by a lot of points.

Last year, the championship was decided by inches in the last corner of the Santa Rosa Mile. Smith was all-in to take his first Grand National Championship. Mees had all winter to think about getting that number-one plate back and he's made a big statement in the first two rounds; he came to play. But as the series moves to bigger tracks, more of Smith's forte, the defending champ sits

in good position 13 points back with 16 rounds to go. So while it looks like Mees is unbeatable, there's plenty of fighting left.

Speaking Of Fighting...

It's not MMA, but the shorter tracks in flat track are a bit of a cage fight. The Atlanta Short Track was not your Superprestigio type of Short Track – a 3/8-mile banked clay track – but in the AFT Twins Main, it had that same Gladiator style of racing that short track lends itself to. When it was on the line, Sammy Halbert and Mees went at it, a bar-banging battle, literally, as Halbert's bars were taken out from underneath him going onto the straight. Halbert was unhurt, but his shot at the win was over.

By Andrea Wilson



It was a hard move, that's for sure. But in racing 'incidents' generally people's opinions are shaded by whom they favor.

THE ATTENDANCE AT THE FIRST TWO ROUNDS HAS ALSO GROWN AND THERE'S A BUZZ ABOUT THE PADDOCK

Making it more ambiguous is the fact that flat track is not road racing, or like any other form of motorcycle sport. Close racing is part of the game, especially on shorter tracks. And you don't have to be an expert to figure that out when the incident in question occurred between "Slammin' Sammy Halbert and Jared "the Jammer" Mees.

Growth Spurt

Another big question going into the 2017 season: was the hype about this new era of flat track for real? Just two rounds in and if you love the sport, there's a lot to be hyped about. The contingency has grown leaps and bounds, from \$280,000 to over a million. The attendance at the first two rounds has also grown and there's a buzz about the paddock that there's actually a way to make money in the sport, for the first time in a long time, perhaps ever. That's not to say that this growth spurt doesn't have growing pains, but the consensus is that it's moving in the right direction.





KAWASAKI Z900

Words by Roland Brown, Photos by Double Red & Felix Romero

MAKING THE POINT



TEST

WHEN KAWASAKI RELEASES A NAKED FOUR-CYLINDER SUPERBIKE CALLED THE Z900, NOSTALGIA IS GUARANTEED AND EXPECTATION LEVELS ARE HIGH. BACK IN THE MID-SEVENTIES, THE ORIGINAL MODEL OF THAT NAME WAS THE WORLD'S FINEST SUPERBIKE: A MIGHTY 903CC, DOHC POWERHOUSE WHOSE FOREBEAR THE Z1 HAD RECENTLY REDEFINED THE LIMITS OF TWO-WHEELED ACCELERATION AND EXCITEMENT.



Four decades later, the new-generation Z900 makes no attempt to emulate its namesake's all-conquering performance, nor even (disappointingly, to some eyes) to replicate its Seventies style. But with a maximum output of 123bhp – more than 50 per cent up on that old warrior – it is hardly lacking in straight-line speed. And with an all-new tubular steel trellis frame, it adds a classical twist to an update of one of Kawasaki's most important models.

That model is the Z800 – a relatively humble all-rounder that just happens to be one of Europe's best selling bikes. Its success is essentially due to a blend of versatile, four-cylinder performance and competitive price. Like the Z750 from which it was developed, it has been popular despite being rather overweight. Even the Z900's project leader, Seiji Hagio, admits that owners' feedback on

the Z800 tended to describe it as “fun and exciting... but heavy”.

This helps explain the comprehensively redesigned Z900, whose frame of slim, high-tensile steel tubes is a radical and eye-catching departure from the Z800's relatively crude and heavy design. The engine's capacity is increased substantially, from 806 to 948cc. Kawasaki felt able to boost performance because the firm also has a new entry-level parallel twin, the Z650, allowing the Z900 to be pushed further towards more experienced riders.

Rather than being an enlarged Z800 powerplant, the engine is a sleeved-down Z1000 unit, complete with stronger bottom end. Other changes including smaller throttle bodies, revised injection system and a new four-into-one exhaust combine to generate that 123bhp peak output at 8000rpm, giving a useful



KAWASAKI Z900



Kawasaki

12bhp increase over the Z800 without approaching the larger engine's 140bhp maximum.

The new frame, finished in Kawasaki's traditional light green, was designed using techniques the firm's engineers perfected when developing a similar chassis for the supercharged Ninja H2. The trellis construction weighs just 13.5kg, with the aluminium swing-arm adding a further 3.9kg. Both those figures contribute to the Z900's wet weight of 210kg, a substantial 21kg reduction over the Z800.

Even that total isn't especially light by naked bike standards (Yamaha's MT-09, for example, weighs 193kg with a full



KAWASAKI Z900





tank) but the Z900 feels very manageable, helped by a respectably low seat. Its feeling of simplicity is enhanced by the rider's view, of just a one-piece handlebar, instrument panel and petrol tank. And very basic switchgear, because the Z900 doesn't offer electronic functions such as multiple modes or traction control.

That is surprising, given that rivals including the MT-09, Suzuki's new GSX-S750 and Triumph's updated Street Triple S all offer such electronic assistance. But the Kawasaki's single riding mode is perfectly adequate, its crisp throttle response and broad spread of torque making the bike enjoyably quick and very rider-friendly.

Midrange acceleration is strong, albeit not a match for the bigger Z1000 unit, and the Kawasaki kicks harder as the revcounter needle approaches the 11,000rpm redline, rider flicking through a slick six-speed gearbox whose first five ratios are closely spaced, leaving top as an overdrive. Like any naked bike the Kawasaki isn't designed for prolonged high speed, but it heads towards a maximum of close to 150mph at a thrilling rate. Shame its muted intake and exhaust sound is soon lost to the breeze, despite Kawasaki's claim to have tuned the air-box.

KAWASAKI Z900



The Z900 is equally at home on a twisty road, its weight advantage over the Z800 clear in subtly sweeter, more responsive handling. Steering geometry is fairly sporty, and the simple suspension works well enough to provide a comfortably plush ride plus sufficient damping for enthusiastic cornering. Ground clearance and grip from the Dunlop tyres are very adequate, and the bike slows efficiently thanks to a combination of 300mm petal front brake discs and four-piston calipers.

Its ABS system (a legal requirement these days) is efficient on the rare occasions that it's required, and some traditionalist riders won't bemoan the Kawasaki's lack of traction control, regardless of a good system's potential value. Despite its aggressively Japa-

nese "sugomi" styling, the Z900 complements its famous old name with a relatively simple, down-to-earth character that some will find refreshing.

The lack of complex electronics has helped Kawasaki set the price roughly 20 per cent lower than the Z1000's (£8249 in the UK). Its aforementioned rivals from Suzuki, Triumph and Yamaha are cheaper still but the Z900 has plenty of appeal. It's not an all-conquering king of the road like its famous namesake. But this latest in Kawasaki's line of mid-sized naked fours is usefully quicker and sharper than its predecessor, and might prove equally successful.



BACK PAGE

Photo by Monster Energy/Swanberg







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